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Chapter 19 - Black Despair

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"Ah," said Zat Arras, "to what kindly circumstance am I indebted for the pleasure of this unexpected visit from the Prince of Helium?"

While he was speaking, one of my guards had removed the gag from my mouth, but I made no reply to Zat Arras: simply standing there in silence with level gaze fixed upon the Jed of Zodanga. And I doubt not that my expression was coloured by the contempt I felt for the man.

The eyes of those within the chamber were fixed first upon me and then upon Zat Arras, until finally a flush of anger crept slowly over his face.

"You may go," he said to those who had brought me, and when only his two companions and ourselves were left in the chamber, he spoke to me again in a voice of ice--very slowly and deliberately, with many pauses, as though he would choose his words cautiously.

"John Carter," he said, "by the edict of custom, by the law of our religion, and by the verdict of an impartial court, you are condemned to die. The people cannot save you--I alone may accomplish that. You are absolutely in my power to do with as I wish--I may kill you, or I may free you, and should I elect to kill you, none would be the wiser.

"Should you go free in Helium for a year, in accordance with the conditions of your reprieve, there is little fear that the people would ever insist upon the execution of the sentence imposed upon you.

"You may go free within two minutes, upon one condition. Tardos Mors will never return to Helium. Neither will Mors Kajak, nor Dejah Thoris. Helium must select a new Jeddak within the year. Zat Arras would be Jeddak of Helium. Say that you will espouse my cause. This is the price of your freedom. I am done."

I knew it was within the scope of Zat Arras' cruel heart to destroy me, and if I were dead I could see little reason to doubt that he might easily become Jeddak of Helium. Free, I could prosecute the search for Dejah Thoris. Were I dead, my brave comrades might not be able to carry out our plans. So, by refusing to accede to his request, it was quite probable that not only would I not prevent him from becoming Jeddak of Helium, but that I would be the means of sealing Dejah Thoris' fate--of consigning her, through my refusal, to the horrors of the arena of Issus.

For a moment I was perplexed, but for a moment only. The proud daughter of a thousand Jeddaks would choose death to a dishonorable alliance such as this, nor could John Carter do less for Helium than his Princess would do.

Then I turned to Zat Arras.

"There can be no alliance," I said, "between a traitor to Helium and a prince of the House of Tardos Mors. I do not believe, Zat Arras, that the great Jeddak is dead."

Zat Arras shrugged his shoulders.

"It will not be long, John Carter," he said, "that your opinions will be of interest even to yourself, so make the best of them while you can. Zat Arras will permit you in due time to reflect further upon the magnanimous offer he has made you. Into the silence and darkness of the pits you will enter upon your reflection this night with the knowledge that should you fail within a reasonable time to agree to the alternative which has been offered you, never shall you emerge from the darkness and the silence again. Nor shall you know at what minute the hand will reach out through the darkness and the silence with the keen dagger that shall rob you of your last chance to win again the warmth and the freedom and joyousness of the outer world."

Zat Arras clapped his hands as he ceased speaking. The guards returned.

Zat Arras waved his hand in my direction.

"To the pits," he said. That was all. Four men accompanied me from the chamber, and with a radium hand-light to illumine the way, escorted me through seemingly interminable tunnels, down, ever down beneath the city of Helium.

At length they halted within a fair-sized chamber. There were rings set in the rocky walls. To them chains were fastened, and at the ends of many of the chains were human skeletons. One of these they kicked aside, and, unlocking the huge padlock that had held a chain about what had once been a human ankle, they snapped the iron band about my own leg. Then they left me, taking the light with them.

Utter darkness prevailed. For a few minutes I could hear the clanking of accoutrements, but even this grew fainter and fainter, until at last the silence was as complete as the darkness. I was alone with my gruesome companions--with the bones of dead men whose fate was likely but the index of my own.

How long I stood listening in the darkness I do not know, but the silence was unbroken, and at last I sunk to the hard floor of my prison, where, leaning my head against the stony wall, I slept.

It must have been several hours later that I awakened to find a young man standing before me. In one hand he bore a light, in the other a receptacle containing a gruel-like mixture--the common prison fare of Barsoom.

"Zat Arras sends you greetings," said the young man, "and commands me to inform you that though he is fully advised of the plot to make you Jeddak of Helium, he is, however, not inclined to withdraw the offer which he has made you. To gain your freedom you have but to request me to advise Zat Arras that you accept the terms of his proposition."

I but shook my head. The youth said no more, and, after placing the food upon the floor at my side, returned up the corridor, taking the light with him.

Twice a day for many days this youth came to my cell with food, and ever the same greetings from Zat Arras. For a long time I tried to engage him in conversation upon other matters, but he would not talk, and so, at length, I desisted.

For months I sought to devise methods to inform Carthoris of my whereabouts. For months I scraped and scraped upon a single link of the massive chain which held me, hoping eventually to wear it through, that I might follow the youth back through the winding tunnels to a point where I could make a break for liberty.

I was beside myself with anxiety for knowledge of the progress of the expedition which was to rescue Dejah Thoris. I felt that Carthoris would not let the matter drop, were he free to act, but in so far as I knew, he also might be a prisoner in Zat Arras' pits.

That Zat Arras' spy had overheard our conversation relative to the selection of a new Jeddak, I knew, and scarcely a half-dozen minutes prior we had discussed the details of the plan to rescue Dejah Thoris. The chances were that that matter, too, was well known to him. Carthoris, Kantos Kan, Tars Tarkas, Hor Vastus, and Xodar might even now be the victims of Zat Arras' assassins, or else his prisoners.

I determined to make at least one more effort to learn something, and to this end I adopted strategy when next the youth came to my cell. I had noticed that he was a handsome fellow, about the size and age of Carthoris. And I had also noticed that his shabby trappings but illy comported with his dignified and noble bearing.

It was with these observations as a basis that I opened my negotiations with him upon his next subsequent visit.

"You have been very kind to me during my imprisonment here," I said to him, "and as I feel that I have at best but a very short time to live, I wish, ere it is too late, to furnish substantial testimony of my appreciation of all that you have done to render my imprisonment bearable.

"Promptly you have brought my food each day, seeing that it was pure and of sufficient quantity. Never by word or deed have you attempted to take advantage of my defenceless condition to insult or torture me. You have been uniformly courteous and considerate--it is this more than any other thing which prompts my feeling of gratitude and my desire to give you some slight token of it.

"In the guard-room of my palace are many fine trappings. Go thou there and select the harness which most pleases you --it shall be yours. All I ask is that you wear it, that I may know that my wish has been realized. Tell me that you will do it."

The boy's eyes had lighted with pleasure as I spoke, and I saw him glance from his rusty trappings to the magnificence of my own. For a moment he stood in thought before he spoke, and for that moment my heart fairly ceased beating --so much for me there was which hung upon the substance of his answer.

"And I went to the palace of the Prince of Helium with any such demand, they would laugh at me and, into the bargain, would more than likely throw me headforemost into the avenue. No, it cannot be, though I thank you for the offer. Why, if Zat Arras even dreamed that I contemplated such a thing he would have my heart cut out of me."

"There can be no harm in it, my boy," I urged. "By night you may go to my palace with a note from me to Carthoris, my son. You may read the note before you deliver it, that you may know that it contains nothing harmful to Zat Arras. My son will be discreet, and so none but us three need know. It is very simple, and such a harmless act that it could be condemned by no one."

Again he stood silently in deep thought.

"And there is a jewelled short-sword which I took from the body of a northern Jeddak. When you get the harness, see that Carthoris gives you that also. With it and the harness which you may select there will be no more handsomely accoutred warrior in all Zodanga.

"Bring writing materials when you come next to my cell, and within a few hours we shall see you garbed in a style befitting your birth and carriage."

Still in thought, and without speaking, he turned and left me. I could not guess what his decision might be, and for hours I sat fretting over the outcome of the matter.

If he accepted a message to Carthoris it would mean to me that Carthoris still lived and was free. If the youth returned wearing the harness and the sword, I would know that Carthoris had received my note and that he knew that I still lived. That the bearer of the note was a Zodangan would be sufficient to explain to Carthoris that I was a prisoner of Zat Arras.

It was with feelings of excited expectancy which I could scarce hide that I heard the youth's approach upon the occasion of his next regular visit. I did not speak beyond my accustomed greeting of him. As he placed the food upon the floor by my side he also deposited writing materials at the same time.

My heart fairly bounded for joy. I had won my point. For a moment I looked at the materials in feigned surprise, but soon I permitted an expression of dawning comprehension to come into my face, and then, picking them up, I penned a brief order to Carthoris to deliver to Parthak a harness of his selection and the short-sword which I described. That was all. But it meant everything to me and to Carthoris.

I laid the note open upon the floor. Parthak picked it up and, without a word, left me.

As nearly as I could estimate, I had at this time been in the pits for three hundred days. If anything was to be done to save Dejah Thoris it must be done quickly, for, were she not already dead, her end must soon come, since those whom Issus chose lived but a single year.

The next time I heard approaching footsteps I could scarce await to see if Parthak wore the harness and the sword, but judge, if you can, my chagrin and disappointment when I saw that he who bore my food was not Parthak.

"What has become of Parthak?" I asked, but the fellow would not answer, and as soon as he had deposited my food, turned and retraced his steps to the world above.

Days came and went, and still my new jailer continued his duties, nor would he ever speak a word to me, either in reply to the simplest question or of his own initiative.

I could only speculate on the cause of Parthak's removal, but that it was connected in some way directly with the note I had given him was most apparent to me. After all my rejoicing, I was no better off than before, for now I did not even know that Carthoris lived, for if Parthak had wished to raise himself in the estimation of Zat Arras he would have permitted me to go on precisely as I did, so that he could carry my note to his master, in proof of his own loyalty and devotion.

Thirty days had passed since I had given the youth the note. Three hundred and thirty days had passed since my incarceration. As closely as I could figure, there remained a bare thirty days ere Dejah Thoris would be ordered to the arena for the rites of Issus.

As the terrible picture forced itself vividly across my imagination, I buried my face in my arms, and only with the greatest difficulty was it that I repressed the tears that

welled to my eyes despite my every effort. To think of that beautiful creature torn and rended by the cruel fangs of the hideous white apes! It was unthinkable. Such a horrid fact could not be; and yet my reason told me that within thirty days my incomparable Princess would be fought over in the arena of the First Born by those very wild beasts; that her bleeding corpse would be dragged through the dirt and the dust, until at last a part of it would be rescued to be served as food upon the tables of the black nobles.

I think that I should have gone crazy but for the sound of my approaching jailer. It distracted my attention from the terrible thoughts that had been occupying my entire mind. Now a new and grim determination came to me. I would make one super-human effort to escape. Kill my jailer by a ruse, and trust to fate to lead me to the outer world in safety.

With the thought came instant action. I threw myself upon the floor of my cell close by the wall, in a strained and distorted posture, as though I were dead after a struggle or convulsions. When he should stoop over me I had but to grasp his throat with one hand and strike him a terrific blow with the slack of my chain, which I gripped firmly in my right hand for the purpose.

Nearer and nearer came the doomed man. Now I heard him halt before me. There was a muttered exclamation, and then a step as he came to my side. I felt him kneel beside me. My grip tightened upon the chain. He leaned close to me. I must open my eyes to find his throat, grasp it, and strike one mighty final blow all at the same instant.

The thing worked just as I had planned. So brief was the interval between the opening of my eyes and the fall of the chain that I could not check it, though in that minute interval I recognized the face so close to mine as that of my son, Carthoris.

God! What cruel and malign fate had worked to such a frightful end! What devious chain of circumstances had led my boy to my side at this one particular minute of our lives when I could strike him down and kill him, in ignorance of his identity! A benign though tardy Providence blurred my vision and my mind as I sank into unconsciousness across the lifeless body of my only son.

When I regained consciousness it was to feel a cool, firm hand pressed upon my forehead. For an instant I did not open my eyes. I was endeavouring to gather the loose ends of many thoughts and memories which flitted elusively through my tired and overwrought brain.

At length came the cruel recollection of the thing that I had done in my last conscious act, and then I dared not to open my eyes for fear of what I should see lying beside me. I wondered who it could be who ministered to me. Carthoris must have had a companion whom I had not seen. Well, I must face the inevitable some time, so why not now, and with a sigh I opened my eyes.

Leaning over me was Carthoris, a great bruise upon his forehead where the chain had struck, but alive, thank God, alive! There was no one with him. Reaching out my arms, I took my boy within them, and if ever there arose from any planet a fervent prayer of gratitude, it was there beneath the crust of dying Mars as I thanked the Eternal Mystery for my son's life.

The brief instant in which I had seen and recognized Carthoris before the chain fell must have been ample to check the force of the blow. He told me that he had lain unconscious for a time--how long he did not know.

"How came you here at all?" I asked, mystified that he had found me without a guide.

"It was by your wit in apprising me of your existence and imprisonment through the youth, Parthak. Until he came for his harness and his sword, we had thought you dead. When I had read your note I did as you had bid, giving Parthak his choice of the harnesses in the guardroom, and later bringing the jewelled short-sword to him; but the minute that I had fulfilled the promise you evidently had made him, my obligation to him ceased. Then I commenced to question him, but he would give me no information as to your whereabouts. He was intensely loyal to Zat Arras.

"Finally I gave him a fair choice between freedom and the pits beneath the palace--the price of freedom to be full information as to where you were imprisoned and directions which would lead us to you; but still he maintained his stubborn partisanship. Despairing, I had him removed to the pits, where he still is.

"No threats of torture or death, no bribes, however fabulous, would move him. His only reply to all our importunities was that whenever Parthak died, were it to-morrow or a thousand years hence, no man could truly say, 'A traitor is gone to his deserts.'

"Finally, Xodar, who is a fiend for subtle craftiness, evolved a plan whereby we might worm the information from him. And so I caused Hor Vastus to be harnessed in the metal of a Zodangan soldier and chained in Parthak's cell beside him. For fifteen days the noble Hor Vastus has languished in the darkness of the pits, but not in vain. Little by little he won the confidence and friendship of the Zodangan, until only to-day Parthak, thinking that he was speaking not only to a countryman, but to a dear friend, revealed that Hor Vastus the exact cell in which you lay.

"It took me but a short time to locate the plans of the pits of Helium among thy official papers. To come to you, though, was a trifle more difficult matter. As you know, while all the pits beneath the city are connected, there are but single entrances from those beneath each section and its neighbour, and that at the upper level just underneath the ground.

"Of course, these openings which lead from contiguous pits to those beneath government buildings are always guarded, and so, while I easily came to the entrance to the pits beneath the palace which Zat Arras is occupying, I found there a Zodangan soldier on guard. There I left him when I had gone by, but his soul was no longer with him.

"And here I am, just in time to be nearly killed by you," he ended, laughing.

As he talked Carthoris had been working at the lock which held my fetters, and now, with an exclamation of pleasure, he dropped the end of the chain to the floor, and I stood up once more, freed from the galling irons I had chafed in for almost a year.

He had brought a long-sword and a dagger for me, and thus armed we set out upon the return journey to my palace.

At the point where we left the pits of Zat Arras we found the body of the guard Carthoris had slain. It had not yet been discovered, and, in order to still further delay search and mystify the jed's people, we carried the body with us for a short distance, hiding it in a tiny cell off the main corridor of the pits beneath an adjoining estate.

Some half-hour later we came to the pits beneath our own palace, and soon thereafter emerged into the audience chamber itself, where we found Kantos Kan, Tarkas, Hor Vastus, and Xodar awaiting us most impatiently.

No time was lost in fruitless recounting of my imprisonment. What I desired to know was how well the plans we had laid nearly a year ago and had been carried out.

"It has taken much longer than we should have expected," replied Kantos Kan. "The fact that we were compelled to maintain secrecy has handicapped us terribly. Zat Arras' spies are everywhere. Yet, to the best of my knowledge, no word of our real plans has reached the villain's ear."

"To-night there lies about the great docks at Hastor a fleet of a thousand of the mightiest battleships that ever sailed above Barsoom, and each equipped to navigate the air of Omean and the waters of Omean itself. Upon each battleship there are five ten-man cruisers, and ten five-man scouts, and a hundred one-man scouts; in all, one hundred and sixteen thousand craft fitted with both air and water propellers."

"At Thark lie the transports for the green warriors of Tars Tarkas, nine hundred large troopships, and with them their convoys. Seven days ago all was in readiness, but we waited in the hope that by so doing your rescue might be encompassed in time for you to command the expedition. It is well we waited, my Prince."

"How is it, Tars Tarkas," I asked, "that the men of Thark take not the accustomed action against one who returns from the bosom of Iss?"

"They sent a council of fifty chieftains to talk with me here," replied the Thark. "We are a just people, and when I had told them the entire story they were as one man in agreeing that their action toward me would be guided by the action of Helium toward John Carter. In the meantime, at their request, I was to resume my throne as Jeddak of Thark, that I might negotiate with neighboring hordes for warriors to compose the land forces of the expedition. I have done that which I agreed. Two hundred and fifty thousand fighting men, gathered from the ice cap at the north to the ice cap at the south, and representing a thousand different communities, from a hundred wild and warlike hordes, fill the great city of Thark to-night. They are ready to sail for the Land of the First Born when I give the word and fight there until I bid them stop. All they ask is the loot they take and transportation to their own territories when the fighting and the looting are over. I am done."

"And thou, Hor Vastus," I asked, "what has been thy success?"

"A million veteran fighting-men from Helium's thin waterways man the battleships, the transports, and the convoys," he replied. "Each is sworn to loyalty and secrecy, none were enough recruited from a single district to cause suspicion."

"Good!" I cried. "Each has done his duty, and now, Kantos Kan, may we not repair at once to Hastor and get under way before to-morrow's sun?"

"We should lose no time, Prince," replied Kantos Kan. "Already the people of Hastor are questioning the purpose of so great a fleet fully manned with fighting-men. I wonder much that word of it has not before reached Zat Arras. A cruiser awaits above at your own dock; let us leave at--" A fusillade of shots from the palace gardens just without cut short his further words.

Together we rushed to the balcony in time to see a dozen members of my palace guard disappear in the shadows of some distant shrubbery as in pursuit of one who fled. Directly beneath us upon the scarlet sward a handful of guardsmen were stooping above a still and prostrate form.

While we watched they lifted the figure in their arms and at my command bore it to the audience chamber where we had been in council. When they stretched the body at our feet we saw that it was that of a red man in the prime of life--his metal was plain, such as common soldiers wear, or those who wish to conceal their identity.

"Another of Zat Arras' spies," said Hor Vastus.

"So it would seem," I replied, and then to the guard: "You may remove the body."

"Wait!" said Xodar. "If you will, Prince, ask that a cloth and a little thout oil be brought."

I nodded to one of the soldiers, who left the chamber, returning presently with the things that Xodar had requested. The black kneeled beside the body and, dipping a corner of the cloth in the thout oil, rubbed for a moment on the dead face before him, Then he turned to me with a smile, pointing to his work. I looked and saw that where Xodar had applied the thout oil the face was white, as white as mine, and then Xodar seized the black hair of the corpse and with a sudden wrench tore it all away, revealing a hairless pate beneath.

Guardsmen and nobles pressed close about the silent witness upon the marble floor. Many were the exclamations of astonishment and questioning wonder as Xodar's acts confirmed the suspicion which he had held.

"A thern!" whispered Tars Tarkas.

"Worse than that, I fear," replied Xodar. "But let us see."

With that he drew his dagger and cut open a locked pouch which had dangled from the thern's harness, and from it he brought forth a cirlet of gold set with a large gem--it was the mate to that which I had taken from Sator Throg.

"He was a Holy Thern," said Xodar. "Fortunate indeed it is for us that he did not escape."

The officer of the guard entered the chamber at this juncture.

"My Prince," he said, "I have to report that this fellow's companion escaped us. I think that it was with the connivance of one or more of the men at the gate. I have ordered them all under arrest."

Xodar handed him the thout oil and cloth.

"With this you may discover the spy among you," he said.

I at once ordered a secret search within the city, for every Martian noble maintains a secret service of his own.

A half-hour later the officer of the guard came again to report. This time it was to confirm our worst fears--half the guards at the gate that night had been therns disguised as red men.

"Come!" I cried. "We must lose no time. On to Hastor at once. Should the therns attempt to check us at the southern verge of the ice cap it may result in the wrecking of all our plans and the total destruction of the expedition."

Ten minutes later we were speeding through the night toward Hastor, prepared to strike the first blow for the preservation of Dejah Thoris.

